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ABSTRACT

Beyond being of therapeutic and social value and of short-run utility for individual attendants, interactions at academic conventions may, in fact, affect the directions of research within a particular discipline for years thereafter. The convention provides a forum for the diffusion of theoretical, methodological, and empirical information that precedes publication in at least one field by an average of 15 months. Conventions facilitate formal exchanges of information and the development of informal linkages. They allow for a larger number of different interpersonal link-ups than any other context available to members of a discipline, and they serve important function in the development and refinement of the sense of identity both for the sponsoring association and the parent discipline. Conventions, viewed as information diffusion, exchange, and utilization mechanisms, are as amenable to description, prediction, and control as are other information systems. A list of various research methods, which can be used for assessing the nature, function, and outcomes of particular conventions and convention sessions in these contexts, is included. (LL)

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The Academic Convention: Notes Toward An Evaluative Framework

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The Academic Convention: Notes Toward An Evaluative Framework*

Year in, year out conventions continue to attract large numbers of persons of relatively diverse backgrounds, geographical regions, and professional specializations to one central meeting place, once a year for several days, to conduct their formal and informal affairs. Each unique and yet totally redundant, exhilarating and yet intolerably dull, discomforting and yet reassuring, simple and yet complex, the convention lures salesman and scholar alike to play out roles in similar sterotypic fashion, comprising collectively what history will certainly record as one of contemporary man's truly mystifying rituals.

One study of conventions--the academic convention, in particular--indicated that 49% of sampled psychologists attended the annual convention of the American Psychologica Association, representing as many as 10,000 participants in some years (15:1026). During that same year, 39% had attended at least one regional academic meeting. Only 5% of those responding reported that they had attended no scientific gatherings during the year in question (15:1026). Unlike other business and professional conventions, the academic conference does, of necessity, fulfill knowledge generation, exchange, and diffusion functions. Beyond being of therapeutic, social, and of short-run utility for individual attendants, interactions at academic conventions may in fact, impact the directions of research within a particular discipline for years thereafter.

Occupying a critical position in the series of links between knowledge ideation and ultimate utilization, the convention provides a forum for the

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diffusion of theoretical, methodological, and empirical information that precedes publication in at least one field by an average of 15 months (15:1029).

Conventions facilitate formal exchanges of information and the development of informal linkages. They allow for a larger number of different interpersonal link-ups than does any other context available to members of a discipline. And they serve important functions in the development and refinement of the sense of identity both for the sponsoring association and the parent discipline.

While the focus of this paper is specifically the convention, aiming to provide some guidelines for evaluation, it seems essential to develop these guidelines within a larger context than simply a convention, per se. The scientific convention, academic journals, and the sponsoring professional associations, are each after all, but components in the scientific information network for a particular discipline, in this case, communication. Knowledge of the nature of the various components in such a network, their relationships to one another, and the functions of the system as a whole are essential to analysis or evaluation of portions of that system's operation.

At this level of analysis, one is concerned with especially: 1) patterns of information diffusion within a discipline; 2) formal and informal mechanisms for regulating information flow; 3) dynamics underlying patterns of acceptance, rejection, and utilization of information.

Patterns of Information Flow

There have been substantial research efforts directed at systematic description of the flow of information within a discipline from discovery or development, through informal and formal channels, to publication in archival form (10:17). A series of studies entitled Reports of the American Psychological

Association's Project on Scientific Information Exchange in Psychology (1,2,3,4,5,6,7) were devoted specifically to this sort of analysis. The conceptual schemes, research methods, findings, and implications of this work is useful as a basis for speculation about diffusion processes within the communication field, and more importantly suggests a line of inquiry perhaps even more appropriate to communication than psychology.

The attached chart entitled "The Dissemination of Scientific Information in Psychology" provides a visual characterization of flows and time sequences which obtain in psychology (6:137).

Regulation and Utilization of Information

Regulatory mechanisms influencing patterns of information availability and acceptance are of two types. On one hand, there are formal information review and selection mechanisms designed to achieve quality control in journals, convention presentations, monograph series, and scholarly books. There are also gatekeeping functions which occur as a result of informal relationships among members of epistemic communities, which though less purposeful, are likely to be no less influential than more formal decisioning structures. The difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of isolating variance in decision-making best accounted for on the basis of quality of information, from that more appropriately attributed to mutually socialized value sets, is no small matter of concern for communication study (30).

At a generic level of analysis, these matters have been central to Berger and Luckmann, Blumer, Holzner, Duncan, Korzybski, Thayer, and others, whose works suggest the problems of knowing whether papers which are favorably received by convention delegates, for example, are so construed because of some measure of their objective quality or validity, or rather because the presenter was socialized to the same set of communication realities

as the members of the audience of evaluation. Clearly, the need for considering the short and long-run impact of substantive relational variables upon the regulation and utilization of information within a discipline is important.

This has been noted with some vigor by Toulmin (32), who contends that communication patterns are critical to understanding of continuity and change of accepted academic paradigms, and suggest that research in these areas is of increasing importance for study in philosophy and history of science. In a similar fashion, King (25), among other sociologists, argues that factors which influence scientists' decisions to support or reject specific theoretical positions must begin to receive far more attention by sociologist of science.

One line of inquiry which has pertinence for questions of regulation, utilization, and acceptance of scientific information is the work of Kuhn (27), which outlines a cyclic view of the history of science. In this perspective, new scientific paradigms are thought to be created and accepted because they provide alternative perceptual schema for viewing data which could not be well accommodated with existent conceptual frameworks. This view couples well with the position that scientific discovery and diffusion are subject to the same psychological, sociological, and communication dynamics as are other sorts of socially created and maintained realities (7,30).

The concept of the "invisible college" advanced by Price, (28) and studied by Crane (10:6-9), Crawford (12), and others, is interesting in this connection. The intellectual "social circle" as it might be thought of in sociological terms, consists of small groups of scholars organized informally, who maintain contact with one another and, through unformalized information exchanges, influence patterns of scholarship within a discipline, especially

during periods in which a field is undergoing rapid change (10:8-10).

Viewed as something more than an isolated event, the disciplinary convention takes on a perspective as one vital component in the information diffusion, regulation, and utilization dynamic of a discipline. Evaluation of the effectiveness or appropriateness of any single substructure--the convention for example--is senseless if done without regard for the information-metabolizing functions of the total system of which individuals, organizations, and disciplinary goals and functions all are crucial.

Functions of the Academic Convention

For the Individual Participant. The opportunity to formally present one's research (5:63), exposure to the scope of work within a discipline, acquaintance with current research in one's area of interest (5:63), professional advancement and establishing a name for oneself (6:136), participation in informal interaction about research and other scholarly activities with non-local colleagues (5:63,64), the opportunity to converse informally with kindred spirits, and the rites of spring and self-renewal are among the functions conventions apparently fulfill for individual scholars.

In considering these values for the individual, it is useful to distinguish between formal and informal functions, since each set of needs is apparently accommodated in a substantially different fashion. While more scientific information purposefully sought by convention attendants is generally obtained through formal events (9:181), subsequent interviews indicate that the informal and non-purposeful aspects were predominant in respondents' minds (5:66).

Functions for the Organization

From the perspective of the sponsoring academic organization, the

major function of conventions is the integration and optimization of the information needs of individual scholars with needs identified or defined within the discipline as a whole. Along with conventions, journals, symposia, and other organizationally-based activities potentially serve these same purposes.

More immediately, conventions function to define membership (increase or decrease), provide a forum for participation and continued involvement of members in the activities of the organization, heighten organizational solidarity, develop and modify the identity of the association vis-a-vis other disciplines and other associations within the same discipline. Additionally, conventions serve the organization by public exposure for members of the organization who have been elected or selected to perform particular functions thereby legitimizing the individuals, their positions, and the association as a whole [cf.(14,16)]. Further, the convention provides a rationale for organizational officers to convene at a central location, at a similar point in time, in order to conduct the business of the association.

It is worth noting in this context that studies seem to indicate that a number of individuals serving on boards of directors or as officers in regional or national associations report that as a result of these activities they work very closely with other elected colleagues, increasing information flow and opening avenues for stimulating interaction with those individuals (5:64). This is apparently an illustration of an activity where there is optimization of individual and organizational goals.

For the Discipline

The most generic function of conventions, from a disciplinary perspective is the exchange and diffusion of pertinent scientific information.

Additionally, conventions foster refinement in the definition of a field in terms of its conceptual and methodological boundaries--past, present, and future. They provide access to current scientific information well before publication in archival form (5:66, 130, 136). They provide greater interpersonal scholarly linkage possibilities than other academic contexts (5:63-64), and from a quantitative standpoint, account for an exceptionally large number of presentations and publications annually in comparison to journals, symposia, and other dissemination channels (15:1026).

It is especially interesting to note, in this regard, that for the International Communication Association, in 1973, the Journal of Communication published approximately 30 articles while 260 papers were presented at the annual convention. In 1974, the figures were 75 and 330 respectively. Projecting to 1975 with the additional outlet provided by Human Communication Research, the number of journal publications should increase by 30-35.

Moreover, conventions afford widespread access to central scholars in a discipline, stimulate the application of innovation and new techniques (5:66), and provide a basis for the improvement and modification of attendant's research (6:154).

Methods of Evaluation

What follows is a listing of various research methods, which can be used for assessing the nature, function, and outcomes of particular conventions and convention sessions in the context of information diffusion, regulation and utilization within a discipline.

1) Participant Self-Report. Attendants at conventions can be asked to assess the usefulness, strengths, weaknesses, areas needing improvement, extent to which their information needs have been met, extent to which individual research has been influenced by information received during conventions

(3:126), utilizing open-ended or designer-structured instruments as a means of determining the extent to which individual goals are fulfilled.

2) Citation Analysis. The extent to which papers presented during conventions are utilized by individuals who attend sessions where these papers are presented, can be studied by sampling and content analyzing bibliographies of subsequent papers, journal publications, and books prepared by attendants. Through analyzing patterns of citation utilization, it is possible to gain a sense of the extent to which convention presentations and research have been important to the future work of those who have contributed papers to convention sessions, those who attend particular convention sessions, those present at the convention but not at the presentation session, members of the association not present at the convention, or members of the discipline who may or may not be members of the field. Where presentation papers are compiled in a proceedings, analysis of subsequent citation is possible.

3) Author Relationship Analysis. Examination of the geographical and professional relationship of writers of multi-authored convention papers can be useful for determining the sort of information exchanges and interactions represented in convention presentations. Again, given particular purposes, it may be of use to know what percentage of multi-authored papers are prepared and submitted by a graduate student and major professor, what percentage by colleagues from the same or differing institutions, etc.

4) Rejection Rate of Papers. Longitudinal data on rates of rejection of

submitted papers, as well as comparative data on rejection in various divisions of an association, could be useful in developing a systematic description of the nature and mechanisms of information control.

5) Analysis of Methods of Acceptance and Rejection of Papers, Panels, etc. Descriptive analysis of methods utilized within divisions and at the association level to determine the acceptability of panels, papers, programs, symposia, etc., (as well as some attention to following those proposals which were not accepted,) could provide additional input to the study of the mechanisms and roles critical to control of the flow of information at conventions.

6) Content Analysis of Accepted Papers, Panels, and Symposia. A comprehensive picture of information flow within the convention and the representatives of that body of material to the literature of "the field," can be studied with aggregate data on the frequency of focus on particular topics, variables, methodologies, categories of research, etc (6).

7) Diffusion Sequence Analysis. Data relative to record of subsequent publication of work first presented at a convention, can be useful for providing systematic description of the role of the convention in the diffusion and utilization of information within the field. Additionally this data can be valuable as indices of the quality of work presented at conventions.

8) Analysis of Post-Convention Requests for Papers. Some sense of the influence and perhaps quality of convention contributions can be gathered from data indicating the extent to which copies of papers presented within a division or general session were requested subsequent to the convention. In addition

to basic frequency data, it may be useful to gather information on the requestor who they are in terms of geographical location, education, institutional affiliation--and where they acquired information that led to their request.

9) Analysis of Convention Attendance and Non-Attendance Patterns. An important source of useful information is logitudinal data on convention attendance patterns (1:76). Data on geographical and institutional origin of participants as well as information on comparisons between association membership and attendance in terms of age, publication record, etc., could be especially useful in determing the role and function of conventions within the association and discipline. Patterns of convention attending of Association members who additionally hold membership in one or more additional academic association such as SCA, ASIS, AEJ, SGSR, etc. could also be revealing.
Further, study of individuals who have attended conventions of the Association, but subsequently elected not to return would be an important source of data.

10) Convention Session Attendance Patterns. Comparative data on attendance at general, business, and divisional sessions as well as on cumulative attendance at all sessions for a particular time period, can be compared with the total number of registered attendants to provide a measure of the apparent attractiveness of formal versus informal activities. The popularity of scheduled tours, shopping, and other scheduled and unscheduled diversions can also be useful data in this regard.

11) Session Participant Patterns. Perhaps more important are patterns of participation at sessions for those who attend (6:143). Content analysis of session discussion comparing various formats such as paper reading sessions, panel discussions, symposia, etc. could be useful. Here, as with

analysis of convention attendance patterns, it may be useful to systematically determine the educational level, institutional affiliation, record of publication, area of specialization, etc. of individuals who are active (and inactive) in session interaction.

12) Informal Time-Usage Pattern Analysis. Data relative to the way in which attendants use their time for informal activities can be useful with regard to concepts pertaining to the "invisible college." Who talks to whom? How often? For how long? About what? In whose presence? During what time periods? It could also be useful, in this context, to split-out time allocated by attendants to various sorts of formal and informal pursuits. In this way it will be possible to differentiate time spent on personal and professional matters--job-hunting, discussion with potential publishers, social discourse, etc.--from that spent on organization politics, intellectual, and substantive matters.

Conclusions

Some Pertinent Findings

These research methods in conjunction with the conceptual framework suggested previously, imply a number of possible research strategies. Studies of conventions and how they can be altered to improve their functioning relative to the total, disciplinary-information diffusion system have been undertaken in other disciplines. And while in general, there is reason for caution in extrapolating these findings to communication they may, nonetheless, be highly suggestive.

One set of findings which have turned up in several other disciplines in consistent fashion--and worthy of most serious consideration in communication--

has to do with the value of publishing and pre-convention distribution of proceedings. Studies undertaken by the Johns Hopkins University Center for Research in Scientific Communication examine information exchange, influence and informal interaction at conventions in the fields of Aeronautics (18), meteorology (19), optics (20), geophysics (21), sociology (22), engineering (23), and geography (24). The results of these studies indicate:

"Most respondents (58%) believed that discussion would have been enchanced if copies of papers had been distributed well in advance of the meeting (21:279).

> "Consenus among the groups (Attendents of sessions, Attendents of Special Sessions, Authors, and Requestors) with regard to the most frequent comments on communication at the meeting was evident. All four remarked upon the necessity for advanced distribution of preprints and/or abstracts of all program material, and upon the advisability of earlier publication of the program." (23:116)

An experiment to determine the desirability of publishing accepted papers prior to the convention was conducted by the American Psychological Association in 1964. The decision to produce a preconvention publication and study its impact was based upon the following factors:

1) The APA annual convention occurred about 15 months prior to the time of journal publication of its presentations. See Garvey and Griffith, Figure 3 (15:1028) attached.

2) Presentations received some screening for quality, were generally interim reports on work later published in archival form, and at least 2/3 of all recent convention presentations were eventually published.

3) Presentations command a large potential audience.

4) Of all channels, the convention offers the greatest range of opportunities for scientific communication, both in degree and number (15:1026).

A complete report of the study appears in Reports of The American Psychological Association's Project on Scientific Information Exchange in Psychology (3). The results of this study carry significant implications for the planning and organization of conventions in all disciplines. A summary of the relevant highlights (15) indicates:

I. Proceedings provide a rapid channel of communication

A. Presentations became public information 7 weeks prior to the convention, some 12-15 months earlier than they could be expected to appear in journals.

B. Abstracts of the presentations appeared in Psychological Abstracts 4 months following the convention, or 14-17 months before they could be expected to appear had they not been published in Proceedings.

C. Reports appearing in Proceedings can be as current as that which is usually presented in APA convention papers.

II. Proceedings readership is high, relative to that which occurs in the average journal within 7 weeks of distribution.

A. Work reported is current.

B. Articles are short and may be read relatively quickly.

C. Articles are written previews of work presented at convention.

D. Widespread subject matter interests are represented.

III. Proceedings effect on Other Communication Channels.

A. Reduced the burden on authors in providing copies of papers.

B. Shifted copy requests from post-convention to pre-convention.

C. Allowed prior assessment of presentation relevance to work of the requestor.

D. Resulted in a reduction of planned submission of articles for immediate journal publication.

IV. Proceedings Effect on Convention

A. Reduced the percentage of authors reading exclusively from the text of their report.

B. Reduced the size of audiences at presentation.

C. Increased the amount of audience participation.

D. Increased the number of informal interaction between authors and attendants.

E. Increased the amount of content-oriented interactions between authors and attendants.

The APA studies serve to illustrate two major advantages which accrue through the use of a preconvention publication. The first of these is a significant reduction in the time lag associated with public dissemination of scientific information (See figure 3). Reduction of this time lag serves both the discipline and the individual researcher, allowing a earlier and more frequent evaluation of current innovations and research. Second, the use of a preconvention publication yields a higher quality of interaction at the convention itself. It permits the attendant to assess the programs prior to attending. Further, it provides a basis for greater discrimination in the scheduling of convention time, and enables him to familiarize himself with additional relevant materials to enhance his understanding of a presentation and augment his ability to usefully and knowledgeably converse with the author. Also, the preconvention publication of proceedings seems to motivate attendants to read a paper before attending the presentation, permitting an increased quality of input to the author. Also, this interaction results in a increased number of modifications in attendant's work as a consequence (3:116).

Prediction and Control

It seems likely that conventions, viewed as information diffusion, exchange, and utilization mechanisms, are as amenable to description, prediction, and control as are other information systems. A rigorous and

comprehensive analysis of the sort done by the American Psycholgical Association would no doubt yield data providing a sound basis for systematic attempts to manipulate structural and procedural variables in convention system designs. Factors such as geographical positioning of conventions, scheduling, and format of sessions, and methods and time-frame of distributing convention papers, are all subject to purposeful control. What are the trade-offs in moving the convention site from year to year? Frome one part of the country to another? Or out of the country? What of scheduling business meetings at the end of the convention? Or at the beginning? Or on top of other activities? What are the implications of scheduling an association's governance activities such that they effectively create two isolated subsystems? What of divisional sessions versus general sessions? What are the gains and losses of panels versus paper-reading sessions?

These questions are answerable at a variety of levels. The conclusions one arrives at can depend centrally on the relative weights given to disciplinary, organizational, or individual formal and informal goals, respectively. But this takes us full circle. To the extent that the academic convention is more usefully perceived in terms of ritualistic functions, as opposed to a component in a purposive, scientific information exchange network, we may discover our decisioning process to be intellectually embarrassing when exposed to the light of rigorous analysis. It is worth speculating whether the fact that we have previously paid little attention to information exchange within conventions in the past, is a good indicator that we may continue to in the future. That it seems possible to generate far more controversy and commitment over the number of divisions or journals than about their substance, is something to think about.

It may be that out attempts to better understand and control procedural and structural variables within the convention context will, in fact, have little or no impact on the functions they perform, especially for the individual and the organization. Indeed, the structures and procedures may simply be inevitable consequences of the functions being served. Still it can be fun studying and even diddling with the raindance, even in full knowledge that the dance may have little, if anything, to do with bringing rain.

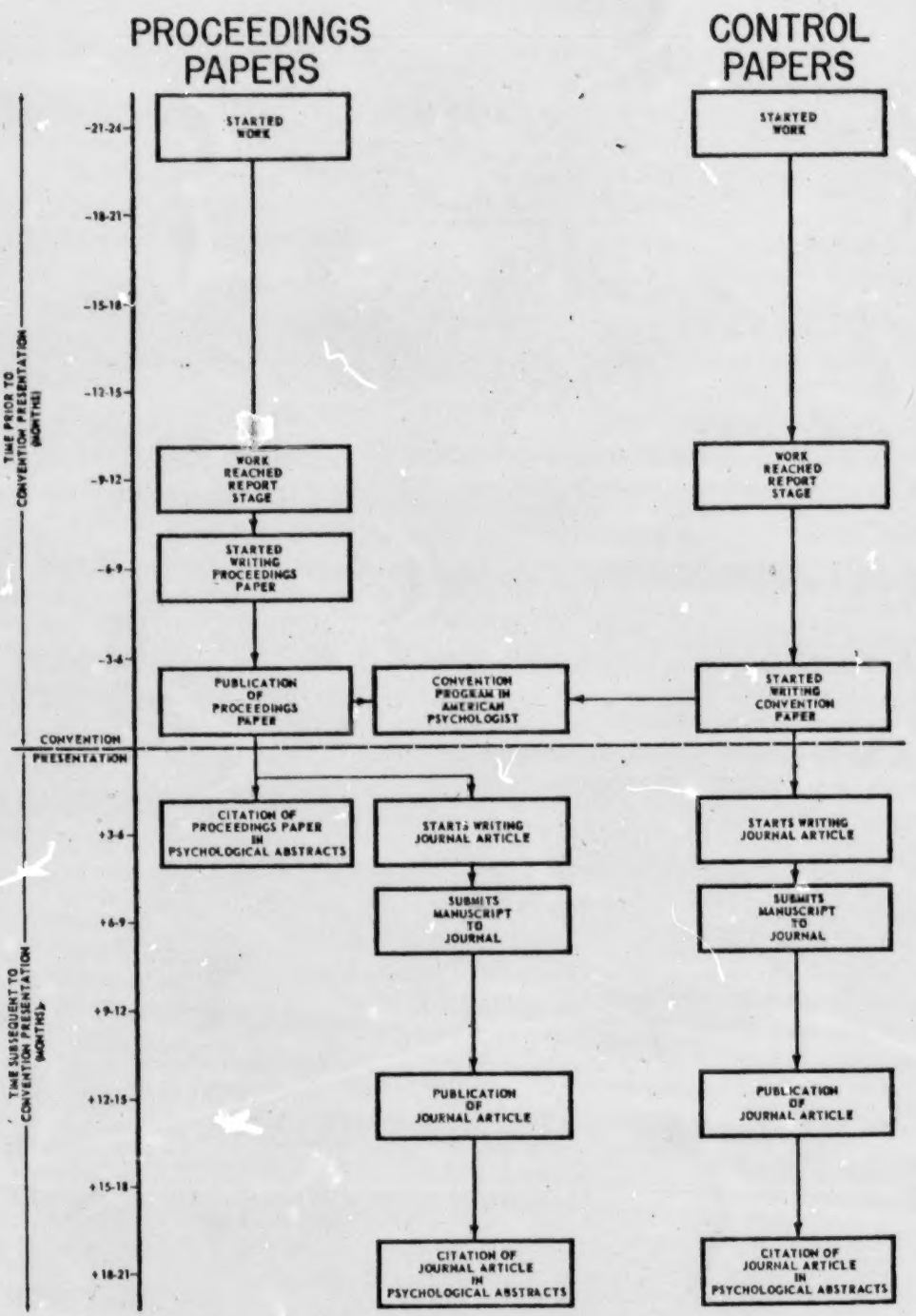

FIG. 3. The dissemination process from the time the researcher begins his work until a report of the results can be retrieved from a secondary source, *Psychological Abstracts*. (This process for the *Proceedings* papers is shown on the left and for the control papers on the right. The chart takes as a time reference the date of the 1965 APA Convention. The times on the ordinate are relative to this date.)

Flow chart showing the dissemination of scientific information in psychology was removed due to small type.

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